



Speech by

Hon. PETER BEATTIE

MEMBER FOR BRISBANE CENTRAL

Hansard 11 November 1998

BRITISH CONSULATE-GENERAL

Hon. P. D. BEATTIE (Brisbane Central— ALP) (Premier) (11.30 a.m.), by leave, without notice: I move—

"That the Queensland Parliament is greatly concerned by a report that the British Government is considering closing its Consulate-General in Brisbane;

calls on the Prime Minister, Tony Blair, and his Government to take account of the growing trade and tourism between Queensland and the United Kingdom and of Queensland's economic growth; and

instead of considering the closure of the Consulate-General, urges the British Government to recognise and respond to the growth in trade and tourism by enhancing its official presence in Brisbane."

This motion will be seconded by the Leader of the Opposition.

A report in the reputable Times World News of 23 October states that the British Foreign and Commonwealth Office has drawn up a hit list of 30 British embassies, high commissions and consulates for closure. The report states that 15 consulates in great trading cities and ports are earmarked for closure in an attempt to save money and it states further that Ministers will decide before the end of the year which commissions should close, with diplomats being withdrawn quickly in 1999. The report lists the British Consulate-General in Brisbane as under consideration for closure.

I have already informed British Prime Minister Tony Blair that I am very much concerned about any suggestion that the Consulate-General may close. I told the Prime Minister in a letter, which I table, that I was aware that Governments study a range of options when making policy and administrative decisions but that any moves to close the office would impede the immense prospects for growth in the relationship between Queensland and Britain. I also stated that the office was a significant conduit between Queensland and Britain at a time when my Government is placing more emphasis on Europe generally, and obviously on Britain.

It is not enough to remind the British Government of our historic ties that extend all the way back to Queensland's creation. Sentiment and tradition are insufficient currency in today's hard-headed world. We need to remind Mr Blair and his Government that Britain has found it necessary to maintain a Consulate-General in Brisbane because of the volume of trade, investment and tourism between the UK and Queensland. If this trade, investment and tourism was diminishing, we would find it difficult to object to the closure. However, business is booming.

Queensland is a significant tourist destination for British visitors. In the 1997-98 financial year, the number of visitors from the British Isles to Queensland increased by 13% compared with the number of visitors the previous year. Exports from Queensland to the United Kingdom rose from \$403m in 1991-92 to \$530m in 1997-98. The UK ranks as our eighth biggest export market and our biggest in Europe. Queensland imports from the United Kingdom have more than doubled from \$152m in 1991-92 to \$337m in 1997-98. I would have thought that that would amount to 337 million reasons why the British Government would want to at least maintain its presence in Queensland. I note with pleasure that the British Olympic team has chosen the Gold Coast as its training site for the Sydney 2000 Olympics, and only recently I met with representatives of that team. That will further enhance the relationship between Queensland and Britain.

In addition to all of these persuasive facts and figures, over many years Queensland has shown remarkable growth. Every year there is a more compelling argument as to why overseas corporations should establish an Asia-Pacific headquarters in Queensland and why Governments should be represented here, particularly in terms of forming partnerships into Asia. For our part, we recognise the need to have strong representation in the United Kingdom. Over the years, the role of Queensland's Agent-General in London has been strengthened. Last week, I had a meeting with him and he has confirmed the strength of that trade and relationship. So instead of contemplating the closure of the Consulate-General, the British Government should examine the facts and consider enhancing the role of its representation here.

I have discussed this matter with the Opposition Leader, and I am pleased to inform the House that he is equally determined that we should take action to persuade the British Government to retain its Consulate-General in Brisbane. That bipartisan commitment from both sides of Parliament should send a very clear message to the British Government on how we value this office.

Not only should the UK retain its Consulate-General but also it should recognise and respond to the growth in trade and tourism by enhancing its official presence in Brisbane. I table a copy of the report, as well as my letter to Mr Blair, and I commend the motion to the House.
